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These are challenging times for UK universities. The tuition fee structure introduced in 2010-11 characterised students as customers paying for a service, who now had to repay a 30-year-term debt, in effect an extra tax for graduates. All this has come home to roost in ways many of us warned about at the time; the extra debt contributes to the housing crisis afflicting that generation and is increasingly resented, while universities cannot charge economic fees to home students since the fee has been frozen by government and has in effect reduced in value from £9000 to £6000 due to inflation. The subsidies earlier derived from higher-paying overseas students are diminishing as their numbers decline. As a result, a majority of UK universities are currently in the red. Humanities courses in particular are being cut and their staff made redundant; all foreign language courses, for example, have been axed in 5 pre-1992 universities in the last ten years and 11 in the case of post-1992 universities on top of the 17 abandoned before that. Cardiff University has just announced 400 possible redundancies and the closure of departments including ancient history, modern languages, music, theology and nursing.

Tenure for academics was abolished in 1988. We are fortunate in this university in that we have more protections against involuntary redundancy compared to most higher education institutions. As spelled out in Statute XII, members of Congregation cannot be made redundant or dismissed on, for example, disciplinary grounds without referral to a Staff Employment Review Panel (SERP). This system was introduced in 2017 with two main objectives; to reduce the number of elaborate and costly quasi-judicial Visitation Board processes that previously served to investigate and decide in cases of possible dismissal, and, secondly, to replace this by creating a quasi-jury system of peers, i.e. SERPs made up of representative Congrega-

Redundancies

tion members. By thereby referring such crucial decisions to Congregation the new system in principle reinforced the importance of Congregation as the supreme legislative body of the University in whose democratic hands all important policy decisions rested. Cambridge does not have (or need) any equivalent to the SERP system, presumably because far fewer members of the Regent House fall under their counterpart of our Statute XII; involuntary redundancies or

dismissals are handled for most academic and academic-related staff on a case-by-case basis and aggregated data are not published.

Since 2020 Annual Reports have detailed the types and numbers of cases referred to SERPs. The latest Report (for 2023-24*) shows that the number of cases has doubled from an average of 5 each year to 10 (with 2 additional ongoing cases). Forty seven cases have been heard since 2017 including appeals against EJRA decisions, a single appeal against redundancy at the termination of a fixed term contract (redundancies at the termination of FTCs themselves are excluded from the SERP procedure) and recommendations for dismissal on disciplinary or management grounds. It needs to be borne in mind that a SERP decision can itself be appealed, but the appeal panel is constituted in the same way as a SERP.

But last year a precedent was set. For the first time the case of an anonymous Congregation member on a permanent contract under threat of involuntary redundancy on management grounds was referred to a SERP by Congregation after a debate in the Sheldonian (see *Gazette Supplement* (1) to No 5428, 4th July 2024). The individual is an academic, as was made clear in flyers circulated at the time of the debate. A notice had been published in advance in the *Gazette*, this being a requirement where an individual's job is at risk: this does not apply where possible redundancies as part of a restructuring of a group

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...and much more

of individuals are proposed. A postal vote following the debate showed that Congregation members were evenly divided in their support for proceeding in this case: there were 936 supporters while 893 opposed such action.

Now there is a second case. On 30th January the *Gazette* announced in the agenda for the Congregation meeting on 25th February the following Resolution: “That a Redundancy Panel be constituted to consider whether to recommend dismissal by reason of redundancy in respect of one member of staff who is in a G6 professional services support role in UAS.” An Explanatory Note gave the following details: “The first four stages of the Redundancy Procedure have been undertaken following a proposed restructure. The proposed re-structure resulted in changes to a role description, which amended the duties and complexity of the role, and the line management. Job evaluation was carried out which resulted in the down-grading of the role from a grade 6 to a grade 5. One individual was warned that they were at risk of redundancy, two others were consulted due to changes in line management responsibilities. The at risk individual was consulted with between January and April 2024. It has not been possible to agree either voluntary redundancy or redeployment despite an extended period of consultation (April–September 2024). In the absence of agreement to redeployment or voluntary redundancy, the agreement of Congregation is sought under Part B, Section 13 of Statute XII to constitute a Redundancy Panel in respect of one individual, in accordance with the regulations governing the membership of panels convened under Parts B, D and H of Statute XII. The role of the panel will be to scrutinise the proposal for redundancy, recommend the member staff (if it considers it appropriate to do so) for dismissal by reason of redundancy, and report its recommendations to the relevant Divisional Board or equivalent. The Union has been informed. The member of staff whose post is under consideration is in a post which comes under the jurisdiction of Statute XII is in a G6 professional services support role in UAS.”

As was pointed out in the debate in the previous case, where several jobs are initially subject to possible redundancy due to ‘restructuring’ it might appear that a “fire and re-hire” management strategy was in play. But looked at in a different way it must be possible, in the interests of efficiency, for the University to terminate jobs when a certain role is no longer needed or funding ceases. Clearly in all such cases the University must make realistic attempts at re-deployment or provide generous financial compensation.

* * *

SERPs carry heavy responsibilities in deciding on dismissal in the name of all the members of Congregation. Congregation needs to be confident that the system works in the best possible way, particularly at a time when the numbers of cases are increasing and, as the recent Annual Report indicates, there are long delays of process.

Given the necessary confidentiality requirements, information about the procedures and grounds for the decisions made by SERPs are not available to Congregation. But we do know that there is an inbuilt potential for unfairness in the current SERP process in two respects. Firstly, the Panels are given training courses and advised by HR together with Legal Services (and have ongoing access to Wellington Square resources), but the individuals appearing before them may be largely unsupported (especially if they are not UCU members) and may well be denied an accompanying legal professional when this

option is applied for: how frequently this happens is not disclosed in the published data. Secondly, the membership of each Panel is drawn by lot from a pool of Congregation-elected volunteers, chosen equitably from each division, with 10 not representing any division. The only constraint on their composition is that there must be at least one academic and one woman in each five-person Panel. The 2023-24 Report shows that statistically non-academics will tend numerically to dominate a Panel membership. Out of the 46 pool members there are only 11 academics and nearly half in the pool (22) are classified as “Female” and “Not Teaching and Research”. This inbuilt feature has the potential to unbalance a Panel’s understanding and proper consideration of the working conditions and experiences of academics in particular.

In the 2020 Annual Report it was stated that; “During the Congregation debates about Statute XII in 2016-17, commitments were made to transparency. It is therefore proposed that this paper be published on the HR Support section of the University website, with a link to the paper published in the *Gazette*. This will enable members of Congregation, whose members are subject to Statute XII and elect the Pool, to read this update”. Not only have such notices not appeared in the *Gazette* but the amount of information made available is reducing; unlike earlier Annual Reports the most recent one does not detail the types or outcomes of cases in the year (only aggregated data since 2017 are given) and the shortened accompanying explanatory text makes it even harder for readers to understand the complexities of the SERP system.

Greater transparency and provision of the greatest possible information about the important functions of SERPs – possibly including anonymised reports to Congregation on each SERP process – is the obvious way in which to increase involvement of Congregation in one of its most far-reaching functions and also to re-balance the membership of the pool. Given the increasing case-load an enlarged pool would seem highly desirable and here retired staff members are an untapped resource offering a wealth of experience. At present panel members are not given time off to prepare for SERP hearings; lengthy and complex files have to be read and digested. An incentive to volunteer to serve might be a formally agreed relief of other duties.

There remains the much more difficult problem of the inequality of arms entailed in the SERP processes – and indeed in other grievance and disciplinary processes that lead up to them. This is all the more important when Panels must increasingly have to navigate value-laden areas of behaviour and conduct which are increasingly contested throughout society. Where, for instance, does the ‘personal’ overlap, or remain separate from, matters the University must properly concern itself with? Increasingly, many of our University colleagues come from overseas backgrounds; how do Panels take into account their different values and assumptions? Should an individual referred to Congregation for potential redundancy have the opportunity to argue their case in person in Congregation; should they, in other words, have the right to relinquish anonymity or would the University treat this as a transgression of confidentiality regulations?

T.J.H

* <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/2023-24-annual-report-on-staff-employment-review-panels-serps-university-appeal-panels-uaps-and-redu>

Statute XII Panels – a personal review

BOYD RODGER

Since 2017, 47 Statute XII Panels were convened to hear cases of staff performance, redundancy, and appeals on behalf of the University and were composed of elected members of Congregation. Those who were part of the Statute XII pool of willing volunteers, like myself, since 2017 must now under Council Regulations stand down. As this natural cycle of who sits on these panels ends, it seems fitting to compare the original expectation of the panels with the experience.

I must be open about how much I can share as a former member of the Statute XII panels. Meetings of the panels are conducted in private and confidentiality is a high priority. Any advice or training provided by solicitors acting on behalf of the University to panel members is subject to Legal Privilege. I can, however, offer a personal opinion about how effective the panels have been in relation to their original expectations and how some unforeseen issues now need addressing. I was also a speaker in the debates in Congregation in 2016 which amended and approved Statute XII as it now stands and remember the passion behind the arguments – a passion so lacking in current debates in Congregation – and why the argued principles were so important.

For the benefit of those readers who have never heard of Statute XII, it is a University Statute that regulates the relationship between the University and the individual. Academic freedom is defined and protected, how cases of individual performance and redundancy are processed and adjudicated via Panel are outlined, how grievances and appeals are dealt with, and there is also provision about how to remove a Vice-Chancellor from office¹.

It took two years for the University Administration to bring the weighty Statute XII legislative proposal to Congregation on 3rd May 2016. Dr Stephen Goss (Pro V-C for Personnel and Equality) presented the new Statute XII to a well-attended Congregation. He said the new Statute would protect academic freedom, support the University to teach and conduct research *efficiently and economically*, and apply the principles of fairness and justice. The system of Panels, he argued, would be just and fair “whilst doing so without delay”². Professor Teresa Morgan (Member of Council) went a little further in her speech and said the Panels will, “act as independent assessors”. I will return later to how Panels acting as independent assessors can be interpreted. I will now use each of these expectations as the basis of assessing if the Statute XII Panels met their expectations.

Protecting academic freedom

Statute XII has procedures for the Visitorial Board to hear cases where academic freedom is an issue. Each Board is constituted by a Chair (a legal professional) and four members who:

“shall be selected from a panel of twelve persons who shall be members of Congregation required to engage in academic teaching and/or research either by their written contracts of employment or by established and agreed practice and who shall be elected by Congregation under arrangements which shall be prescribed from time to time by Council by regulation.”³

No Visitorial Board has met since 2017, however there is one current referral by a Review Panel⁴. Something to note about Review Panels is they can hear appeals against a case being heard at a Staff Employment Review Panel. Since 2017 four Review Panels have heard such appeals and upheld one of them. A Review Panel can refer appeals to the Visitorial Board where academic freedom is considered to be an issue. In my opinion, this is a viable process for raising awareness of academic freedom issues at a senior level and for treating them separately to the usual Statute XII Panel procedures.

Enabling the University to teach and conduct research efficiently and economically

The efficiency part of the original aims refers to Staff Employment Review Panels. Staff Employment Review Panels (SERPs) are basically disciplinary hearings. A Panel is convened when an individual does not behave or perform according to expectations. SERPs constituted 15 of the 47 Panel hearings since 2017 resulting in 6 dismissals and 2 withdrawn through resignation. The old repeated comment that no one gets dismissed at the University of Oxford is no longer true, assuming it ever was true.

There were 4 appeals against the decisions of SERPs. One was upheld, one not upheld and two are currently being considered⁵.

The economical part of the aims comes into play in Redundancy Panels. There has only been one motion before Congregation to set up a Redundancy Panel⁶. However, there have been two Redundancy Panels so far. The first one was in April 2021 which did not require a motion before Congregation since it was subject to an exemption in Statute XII. At the time of writing this article another motion is before Congregation to approve a Redundancy Panel.

Members of Congregation are obviously concerned about the academic impact of redundancies irrespective of whether the individual has an academic or academic-related contract. We exist in an organisational ecology of interdependent networks of practice. A loss of a job in one department can have unintended consequences both within and beyond the department and that is where Congregation can offer a wider perspective that is beyond the remit of a department.

“Without delay”

The Panel secretariat aims to set up a Panel Hearing within 8 to 12 weeks from a referral. However, the average time is actually more like 20 weeks⁷. One of the aims of the Panels was to progress difficult cases without delay whilst still adhering to the principles of justice and fairness but this has not been achieved. There is a fine balance at play here. To thoroughly assess cases sometimes requires additional information and/or legal advice. Justice that is rushed can easily become injustice and I commend my Panel colleagues and the secretariat for taking the time that is necessary to achieve in their view a just outcome.

A more recent initiative by the secretariat was to book days in each member’s calendar as potential hearing dates throughout each Term. These were cancelled if not required. This has appeared to work but the pre-booking does overcome the complexity of some cases and the time it takes to fully understand the brief. However, the aim for swift justice does not take into account the sheer volume of material Panel members are required to read in detail to understand the case before them and to formulate their questions for the Hearing. Bundles of papers averaged around 500 to 800 pages. In one case I was part of, 9 ring binders of papers had to be read. Clearly the University must accept that Panel members may need briefing time for quality reading as preparation. In one instance a Panel member used their personal leave entitlement. Personally, I found I could balance this task with my daily work but that will not be true of everyone. Perhaps the expectation that cases can be heard in 12 weeks from referral needs a reality check.

Originally there were 24 members of the Statute XII pool with the aim of each attending one Panel hearing a year. From the outset this was difficult to achieve due to the volume of cases. It was partly overcome by increasing the pool from 24 to 46. However, some members in 2023/24 attended 3 to 4 Panels in the year⁸.

Applying principles of fairness and justice

The 2016 aim of Statute XII Panels of reaching fair and just decisions is supported by the Panels receiving HR professional and legal advice where appropriate. For me, the ability of Statute XII Panels to “act as independent assessors” requires they do not shirk from asserting their independence from the departments bringing the cases, from the professional advisors, and even from the secretariat supporting the Panels. My experience is that Panel members do ask probing questions at oral hearings and initiate lines of enquiry where there are gaps in the evidence.

One area I think Statute XII Panels could do more is to conclude their deliberations by considering any wider implications or issues to be considered by Congregation. At last June’s meeting of Congregation, it was argued that Redundancy Panels have the option to refer cases back to Congregation or refer issues to Congregation. Out of the 47 Panel Hearings since 2017 how many issues or cases have been referred to Congregation? The answer is none.

It could be argued that no issues were referred to Congregation simply because there was nothing to refer.

This assumes such conscious considerations were made by Panels and that Panels perceive themselves as fully independent. During the redundancy motion debate in Congregation in June 2024, it was argued by University Administration that Congregation simply needs to approve the setting up of a Redundancy Panel: the Panel would consider the specifics of the case along with the option to refer any case back to Congregation. My counter argument in the debate was, based on experience, Panels do not do this.

I have some constructive suggestions to help resolve this dilemma. Firstly, the Chairs of Panels might be recommended to identify during the post-Hearing deliberations if there are any issues that Congregation should consider. Secondly, deliberations should be held *in camera* by requesting the secretariat to leave. This will help to separate those who advise from those who will decide the outcome of a case.

Thirdly, the role of Panels as independent assessors might be clarified further by recognising them explicitly as such. Searching for organisational examples where internal assessors act independently, I found the Royal College of Surgeons for England. In their case:

“Any individual identified by the College to act as an independent assessor will be working independently of the College and not as a formal College or Specialty Association representative.”⁹

If we take fairness and justice seriously, which as a University I believe we do, then we need our Panels to fulfil that independent role as was the original intention in 2016. This needs to be recognised by the secretariat through the way they support Panels. My argument is if Panels took on this independent ethos they could direct lines of enquiry and go beyond the information presented to them where they felt it was necessary. If the Panels are acting on behalf of Congregation they need to demonstrate this. One possible benefit to the University is this enhanced independent role of Panels could prevent some cases going to Employment Tribunal.

Conclusion

I have enjoyed being part of the Statute XII Panels since the debate in Congregation in 2016 approved Statute XII Panels up to when I completed my second term of four years as a Panel member. Seeing the self-governing University at work through the cases was an interesting and insightful experience. I encourage the University to conduct its own review and to consider the suggestions I have made in this article. If from reading this article you feel curious about joining the Statute XII pool, I encourage you to make an application the next time a vacancy is advertised in the *Gazette*.

1. <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/statute-xii-academic-staff-and-the-visitorial-board#collapse1383111>

2. *Gazette* 11th May 2026, Vol 146, Supplement (1) to N5131, p. 494

3. *Statute XII Part C, section 18*: <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/statute-xii-academic-staff-and-the-visitorial-board#collapse1383006>

4. <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/legislation/council-regulations-4-of-2017#collapse1433281>

5. All the SERPs data and appeals against SERPs decisions can be found at: <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/2023-24-annual-report-on-staff-employment-review-panels-serps-university-appeal-panels-uaps-and-redu>

6. Debated in Congregation on 25th June 2024.

7. <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/sitefiles/2023-24-annual-report-on-staff-employment-review-panels-serps-university-appeal-panels-uaps-and-redu>

8. Ibid.

9. <https://www.rcseng.ac.uk/standards-and-research/support-for-surgeons-and-services/irm/independent-assessors/>



Reminders



The following are extracts from the website 'Network Hell', a survey of the impact of the closure of Botley Road at the Rail Bridge (<https://networkhell.co.uk/>). Following its publication it was announced in January that the closure would remain in place until August 2026 – ed

For at least the last seven years, Network Rail has been working on a project to expand the capacity of Oxford station.

In 2022, they added a proposal to widen and deepen Botley Road under the bridge, implying, wrongly, that buses to fit underneath had to be specially made, and that electric buses couldn't do so. (See <https://networkhell.co.uk/inquiry>)

On 22 July 2022, Network Rail submitted its proposals to the city council and proudly (if ungrammatically) stated:

'... the Botley Road bridge has been carefully considered to reduce the timeframe of disruption of the project to the highway network and has been able to reduce the closure of the road to just 4 days.'

That was the basis on which the city council gave approval to the project, at the meeting of the planning committee on 9 November 2022.

As time passed, 'just 4 days' became three months, then six months. Then Network Rail said the closure would start on 9 January 2023 and last for 12 months. Then that was cancelled, and when the road actually closed on 11 April 2023, Network Rail said it would stay closed for six months, April-October 2023, then re-open, and then close another six months April-October 2024. In September 2023 Network Rail said the road would not be reopened in October 2023, after all, but stay closed til October 2024. Then in July 2024 Network Rail announced the road would not reopen in October 2024, and that it had now no project plan or timetable, as that the whole project was being reviewed.

At the time of going to press, the Department of Transport is still reviewing the whole project and it is not known whether it will be cancelled, or curtailed, or when the road will reopen, or when the project will be completed, or what it will cost.

At this point the road has been closed for over 600 days. An overrun on time of 1500% – surely a record, even by Network Rail standards.

The cutting in two of our city has done immense damage to individuals and to businesses, which Network

Rail and the Department of Transport have resolutely ignored, and on which the county and city councils have offered very little help.

When local people talk about the closure, they often say that the hardest thing to bear – apart from Network Rail's extraordinary incompetence – is that no one, not Network Rail, nor Keir (Network Rail's contractor), the Department of Transport or the city nor county councils, is listening to them, nor accepting any responsibility, but instead just point the finger at each other.

The purpose of this website is to give those who have suffered from this disastrous project a voice, allowing them to say what this horrible intrusion into their lives has meant for them.

Introductions

The contributions in this book reflect the many conversations I have had with residents in my surgeries, the people and businesses I have met on visits, and the emails in my inbox over the last two years. Network Rail's shambolic mismanagement of this project has caused profound disruption to the people and businesses of West Oxford and beyond, and I am so pleased this collection has drawn together their experiences.

When Botley Road was first closed in April 2023 I, like so many people in our community, raised serious concerns. Local residents told me they were worried about safety, confused by the unclear signage, and concerned for those with limited mobility. Over a year and a half later, the road is still closed and many of those questions have gone unanswered. Moreover businesses have since folded, people have been cut off from vital services, and we still don't have an end in sight.

This project has laid bare the complete lack of accountability and transparency in many of our institutions. For too long residents' worries and anger fell on deaf ears, with no access to the real decision makers at Network Rail or the Department for Transport.

I hope this book will arrive on the desks of those decision makers so they can properly understand what residents and businesses have been asked to endure. It is up to Network Rail now to convince our community they have a credible plan to finally get this project finished.

LAYLA MORAN

*Liberal Democrat member of parliament for
Oxford West & Abingdon*

This important little report is not just a story about the disaster that has hit West Oxford and its residents. It is a message for the whole country and for the politicians, Ministers, rail organisations and construction companies to let them know that the decisions they take at their computers and behind their desks are mechanical, impersonal, incompetent, unfeeling, and just plain wrong in this case, because they do not heed the needs and daily lives of those affected.

We see this in many areas of our national life, ranging from financial to educational to health matters. These damaging decisions are taken and carried out regardless, in part because those who take them have vested interests, but also because they do not walk the walk (literally, in the case of station-bound West Oxford residents!) and they do not come and see for themselves, and experience the results of the decisions they take on real people, whether they be disabled, or business people or people who live and love the city and find their lives and emotions utterly disrupted. 'Nothing to do with me' says one official or one department to another; 'not my responsibility', says one branch of government to another; 'can't help it', they all say to the businesses that are ruined, the patients in pain, the friendly people whose social life is blocked by their actions.

We are a democracy. The only way to make the decision-takers responsive is through the law courts and by showing our opinion at the next possible election. The revolt against ideological and remote official control has

started in Europe and will gather pace here. This report is a valuable contribution to understanding how our country runs; it has given ordinary people a voice, and we must do all our best to put this account in the hands of those who run us.

RUTH DEECH
Baroness Deech

The following is one of the testimonials included on the website. There are no bus connections from the disconnected Botley Road to the JR; hence the dependence on taxis – ed

Since the closure of the Botley Road I've had to change my GP, based in Jericho, because what was a £14 taxi fare there and back now costs £40. I have had to go to the John Radcliffe hospital several times over the last 15 or so months. That's a round fare of about £50. I am disabled and don't feel confident enough to navigate the pedestrian tunnel on the Botley Road without help. The noise of the construction has also affected me.

One effect of the road closure is that Oxford's fire and police services can only reach West Oxford by way of the Ring Road. On one estimate local businesses have already lost £20million. The Oxford Bus Company has lost an estimated £400,000 so far due to the need to duplicate bus services either side of the closure – ed

How to initiate Congregation actions

How to trigger a debate or discussion in Congregation

It is open to any 20 or more members of Congregation to propose a resolution or topic for discussion at a meeting of Congregation; requests must be made in writing to the Registrar not later than noon on the 22nd day before the relevant meeting. Any 2 or more members of Congregation can submit an amendment to, or announce an intention to vote against, a resolution or a legislative proposal (*i.e.* a proposal to amend the statutes). Notice must be given to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 8th day before the meeting.

Questions and replies

Any 2 or more members of Congregation may ask a question in Congregation about any matter concerning the policy or the administration of the University. Requests must be submitted to the Registrar (in writing) not later than noon on the 18th day before the Congregation meeting at which it is to be asked. The question and the reply (drafted by Council) will be published in *Gazette* in the week prior to the relevant meeting. The answer is also formally read out at the meeting. Supplementary questions are allowed.

Postal votes

Attendance at meetings of Congregation tends to be low. Postal voting can potentially allow opinion to be easily accessed more widely across Congregation membership. Congregation can trigger a postal vote after a debate (but not after a discussion or a question and reply where no vote is taken). 25 or more members of Congregation have to be present ("on the floor") at the relevant debate. The request must be made by 4pm on the 6th day after the debate, signed by 50 members of Congregation, in writing to the Registrar. Council can also decide to hold a postal ballot, by the same deadline.

Flysheets

To generate a flysheet for publication with the *Gazette*, the camera-ready copy (2 sides maximum) should be submitted with at least 10 signatures on an indemnity form (obtainable from the Registrar) by 10am on the Monday in the week in which publication is desired.

Regulations governing the conduct of business in Congregation can be found at: <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/statutes/regulations/529-122.shtml>

Items placed on the agenda for Congregation are published in the *Gazette*.

The Congregation website is at: www.admin.ox.ac.uk/councilsec/governance/congregation.

Advice on Congregation procedures is available from the Council Secretariat on request (email: congregation.meeting@admin.ox.ac.uk).

Hinksey Park

I'm telling the new girl, who is moving in
to my old room about Hinksey Park,
to pause at the boardwalk parallel over
the lake, the leveller, dreamlike sheen
sometimes blue as the bold chaffinch head
or grey as the patient heron.

She'll hear the ring road roar, the train that rolled
her into the city from that quiet town
with no peace,
this park is a place to find your feet
pine-needle-cushioned in autumn,
crocus-kissed in spring.

Among the dreaming spires are redwoods,
the past peels as soft as their bark,
the stillness of the lake gives way
to the cormorants and coots dipping,
disappearing, emerging further
than from where they held
their breath.

When it's time, she'll tell the new girl,
tell herself to go
to Hinksey Park, go witness
how the red kite soars assuredly.

FRANCESCA TEAL

Francesca Teal is from Halifax, West Yorkshire. She is a first-year student of the MSt in Creative Writing at Kellogg College. Prior to the MSt, she read German, Spanish and Ukrainian at Selwyn College, Cambridge. Her short story 'The Swallow's Song' was published in the highly commended collection of the Oxfordshire Libraries' Short Story eBook Competition 2024.

Érik Satie at the Piano: *Gymnopédies*

Curated, curving bodies catch the light
In moments of abandon, limbs
Arching in whiteness reach to ceiling's height
And spring to life. But now it dims...

The treasury of lust
Diminishes as dust

Falls in the sunlight through the blinds and eyes
Fill up with longing, lips still feel
The touch and warmth of cheeks, which I disguise
As transience to kneel

In solitude and trust
And sadness. How an antique bust

Gleams marble in expressiveness and lasts
Despite itself as sunlight darts
On figure studies, bodies, plaster casts,
The curvature of hearts...

A treasury that must
Diminish into dust.

Mercator and the Market

Lush grapes and melon boxes held in glory
When glistening tissue paper came unwrapped
Revealing scents of surfaces within

Where nature in subtropics told the story
That knowledge of geography was trapped
In gleaming essences of captured skin.

Exodus (Briefly)

Stiff railings parted waves of redbrick for
Us, while fan-vaulting tracery
Of winter branches criss-crossed overhead,

Glad to escape the semi-slavery
Of Sunday afternoon, the dead
Weight of the raw estate. A heavy door

Brought china plate and wall prints, then soft notes
Were flattened on piano keys
For Wienerwalds of pre-Victorian days:

A memory we kids could barely seize.
A chilly bedroom held our coats,
As slow hands clapped together, quick to praise.

N. S. THOMPSON

N. S. Thompson is a poet, critic, and translator. He has worked as a gardener and museum curator in Italy and an academic and creative writing tutor in Oxford. His new book of poems, *Line Dancing*, will be published by Shoestring this year.

The toy house

The wind swoops over the fields
Like a ravenous turkey vulture.

My mother bandages her wounded leg
And walks away from death every day:

She counts the miles, makes her report
When she steps back into her house.

*

It's useless to wish a house of stone
For newlyweds: here the walls

Are made of plastic and tin,
The homes are brought to the fields

On wheels, they are set
On tiny bricks: ambition on stilts.

*

In the day, the sound of tires
Lines the motorway like a ribbon,

The trucks' engines protest
So much night transport,

Only now and then I can hear
Geese and cranes calling.

*

The skin continues to learn
Of solitudes year after year,

Chastity after betrayal is reassuring
As a cocoon, or lover's touch

Before the wedding vows.
The nights run wild with the coyotes

Among the plastic and tin houses
In these marshes, vast fields.

I find the mornings at the kitchen
Windows and cling to them

As a child cries and grabs
The mother's skirt, following her.

CARMEN BUGAN

Carmen Bugar's most recent book, *Tristia*, is out now from Shearsman; this is one of the poems included in it. She is also the author of the memoir *Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police* and the monograph *Poetry and the Language of Oppression* (OUP, 2021).

Students rights and obligations in a time of protests

G.R.EVANS

What is the relationship between the rights of students to complain and provisions to discipline students for misconduct, especially when complaint takes the form of protest, including direct action seeking to enforce change? These rest on fundamental differences in the assumptions they make about the relationship of students to providers. The complaining student may claim not to have received an entitlement under a consumer contract. Students faced with punishment for misconduct find themselves to be offenders against two fundamental expectations. One is the historic duty to respect good institutional order. The other is an expectation of intellectual honesty in all academic matters.

The Office for Students explains that when students register to take a higher education course, they are buying 'a service from a university or college'. It lists the 'sources of consumer protection law in England' and notes the requirement of 'accessible, clear and fair complaint handling processes and practices'.¹ Doctoral students in Oxford and Cambridge may do some paid teaching at the request of Colleges: but does this make such a student a College's employee and therefore entitled to raise a grievance?² Recognising such potential uncertainties in its Annual Report in January 2024 Cambridge's Board of Scrutiny recommended that 'details for the contractual and remuneration arrangements for this teaching would remain solely at Colleges' discretion'.³

The right for students to have their complaints taken seriously is relatively new. In November 2000 the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals put forward proposals for the creation of 'student complaints procedures'.⁴ An Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education with responsibility for reviewing student complaints was created under the Higher Education Act of 2004⁵ to meet the newly-defined need. That provision has evolved into the present Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. The OIAHE's powers are limited. It may not consider complaints about the employment of a student, a provider's refusal to admit a new would-be student, an 'academic judgment' or a matter which has been or is being considered in a court or tribunal or in some other dispute resolution forum.⁶

The Competition and Markets Authority⁷ and the Office for Students, created under the *Higher Education and Research Act* of 2017⁸ have both published guidance defining both eligibility and remedies for student complaints. The Office for Students may enforce relevant change to student contracts with providers if it sees fit.⁹ It may recommend that a provider pay compensation to students.

Students may complain to the OfS itself, but only if 'directly affected' by its 'work', including complaints about

its staff or that it has acted in an 'unprofessional way' or handled a contact 'inappropriately'. Its 'regulatory decisions' or the process 'followed to reach those decisions' may not be challenged.¹⁰

Grounds for complaint have expanded in recent years to include claims about unacceptable behaviour such as 'harassment', which are essentially personal to the student claiming to be affected. The protection of freedom of speech in higher education has expanded rather uncertainly so far, with the application of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act* of 2023¹¹ and clarification of claims against providers.¹² Almost universally excluded from student complaints is challenge to academic judgment, including appeals against the result of an examination. Powers in that area seem to fall securely among the area of institutional autonomy protected under the *Higher Education and Research Act* of 2017, s2(5).

Can a complaining student consumer be faced with retribution for something said? That possibility had to be examined when it became possible to make a public interest disclosure as a whistleblower. Both Oxford¹³ and Cambridge¹⁴ have instituted the necessary protections but primarily for their employees in the case of Cambridge. Nevertheless, Cambridge provides a form for making a student complaint, including a complaint against alleged misconduct by members of staff.¹⁵

Now that UCAS regards the acceptance of an offer of a place as instantly forming a contract between the applicant and the higher education provider there remains room for discussion about the difference between a contract to 'admit' or to 'enrol' a student, and a contract to 'educate' the student by then delivering the course and making arrangements to assess the student's performance.¹⁶

Providers are divided into those who open their recruiting of students very broadly and those to which admission is competitive. Oxford and Cambridge admit only a small proportion of the would-be undergraduates who apply and a complaint about that it unlikely to succeed. But there may be exceptions to the exclusion of complaints about admissions. For instance, Cambridge's Judge Business School allows 'admissions complaints'¹⁷ on limited stated grounds. These are 'a serious procedural error (such as the provision of inaccurate information or the failure to follow published postgraduate admissions policy)'; 'bias, or the perception of bias, in the decision-making process'; 'extenuating circumstances affecting the applicants prior academic or non-academic achievements which, for good reason, the applicant did not inform the University of in their application, and which would have had a material impact on the admission decision'.

As members of both the University and a College Ox-

ford and Cambridge students often find it difficult to know which to take a complaint to. The Proctors Office is responsible for Oxford's *University Student Complaints Procedure*¹⁸ and Cambridge University has a twelve-page *Student Complaint Procedure*.¹⁹ In both Universities Colleges may offer their own published procedures for student complaints but they do not all do so in the same way. For example St. John's College, Oxford publishes links to all its procedures in an *omnium gatherum* document, including the one for student complaints.²⁰ By contrast St. John's College, Cambridge explains on its 'Freedom of Information' web page that:

'the College has a review procedure for dealing with complaints. To invoke this procedure you should write to the College's Freedom of Information Officer stating your reasons for the request for a review.'

Oxford's student contract involves acceptance by the student of 'terms and conditions'. These say that 'the University's complaints procedure is explained in section 11 of the *Student Handbook*' and that 'student complaints should be made to the Proctors' Office'. Proctors may consider complaints of alleged failures by 'University administrative and support services (including departmental facilities and central facilities such as libraries, counselling etc.)' and 'departmental teaching, supervision etc.' If none of those forms a ground for complaint 'it is likely that there is a separate procedure they should follow', with a list provided online.²¹

Cambridge puts its detailed arrangements for student complaints in Chapter II of its Ordinances and its General Board creates and updates the necessary Procedure.²² with the latest revision in force from October 2024. This does not allow repeated complaints about the same 'matter of complaint' and permits 'verification checks on evidence'. There may be an appeal 'if the complaint or any part of it is deemed ineligible for investigation'. An 'institution' complained to shall 'act on' any 'remedy imposed', 'consider any recommendations or observations made' and explain itself if it does not act as recommended.

How long will a student wait for a complaint to be attended to? Oxford's procedure promises 'promptness' as well as confidentiality; fairness; flexibility; being allowed a representative; and that 'malicious or vexatious allegations may result in disciplinary action'. Oxford's Proctors usually include in their Oration a summary of their year's work in response. Cambridge gives similar assurances but without publishing the rate of resolution of complaints raised.

* * *

Students complaining jointly or as a group may do so through the relevant complaints procedures or by 'direct action', protesting, marching, sitting-in or otherwise occupying the provider's land or buildings. A recent Higher Education Policy Institute Report (#185) discusses in detail the handling of the 36 pro-Palestinian protestor encampments set up in UK universities in the summer of 2024. Such a student protest may attract 'professional' protesters who are not the provider's students but it is normally treated under the rules binding its students. Oxford's *University Bulletin* said that 'of the 13 protestors arrested' when the Radcliffe Camera was occupied on 24

January by Oxford Action for Palestine, only one was 'a current Oxford student', who would be 'subject to our disciplinary processes'. A *Statement* released by the protesters complained that 'the University has shown a clear lack of urgency and resorted to various stalling tactics, despite repeated calls from our broad, diverse, and multifaceted coalition to end its complicity' in 'the absolute brutality of the zionist settler project'.²³

This continued the protests and occupations of OA4P in 2023.²⁴ The earlier protests had included an episode of forced entry to the University Offices in Wellington Square. That had led to the publication of 'guidance on demonstrations or protests, stating that: 'unauthorised occupation of University land or buildings may lead to legal action including the University issuing court possession proceedings or exercising its common law power of removal'.²⁵

The University told *The Oxford Student* on 24 January that the protesters were 'in breach of University regulations and policies' and that 'the University's disciplinary policies' would be enforced.²⁶ The University emphasises the importance of freedom of speech and 'the right to lawful protest', but declares unacceptable 'actions which disrupt aspects of staff or student life for fellow members of the University, in breach of our codes of conduct'.²⁷

Cambridge has gone to court in response to intrusions on the University's land. A Notice from the Council published in the *Reporter* 13 November 2024 dealt with 'matters relating to the University's investments raised by students taking part in a protest encampment on King's Parade over the summer'. Discussions between student representatives and senior officers had concluded in August 2024 with a set of agreed actions. But that did not end the dispute. Protesters established an encampment in Senate House Yard and Greenwich House, thus intruding on University property. The Registry published a Notice updated on 3 December 2024²⁸ and News appeared on the same day.²⁹ It was stated that 'the protesters have been asked to leave and have been notified of the action which could be taken if they continue to occupy the building'.

Litigation was swiftly initiated. Two injunctions followed, dated respectively 13 and 18 December 2024, with a Penal Notice stating that if 'you the defendants disobey this order you may be held to be in contempt of court and may be imprisoned or fined or have your assets seized'. It was made clear that 'a defendant who is an individual who is ordered not to do something must not do it himself or in any other way. He must not do it through others acting on his behalf or in his instructions or with his encouragement' and that 'a Defendant which is not an individual which is ordered not to do something must not do it itself or by its directors, officers, partners, employees or agents or in any other way'.³⁰ The injunctions both sought to prevent the disclosure of listed documents including witness statements by the Registry and others, perhaps because those might had been seized on for comment by the press.

The comprehensive investigation of such protests and the response to them by UK higher education institutions has now been published by the Higher Education Policy Institute.³¹ A complaint taking the form of such a protest may give rise to a disciplinary sanction. In practice such 'punishment' is likely to take effect more speedily than response to student complaints.

Disciplinary procedures in Oxford and Cambridge have a much longer history than their 'complaints' pro-

cedures. In both Oxford and Cambridge students were members of the University as well as of their Colleges for centuries before either protection applied in its modern form. Their Proctors have always been responsible for maintaining ‘good order’.³² Until comparatively recently breach of the Oxford requirement to wear a gown in the streets would bring a reprimand. In Cambridge ‘light women’ were found to be leading the students astray. Oxford’s Proctors still have disciplinary responsibilities and Cambridge’s Proctors must still ‘ensure good order and discipline in the University’.³³

Currently Oxford gives University discipline a Statute of its own (Statute XI). Disciplinary action may take the form of a written warning, a fine, a requirement to attend a course of instruction, suspension of access to university accommodation or restriction of contact with a named individual or individuals. In their Oration in March 2024 Oxford’s Proctors were already commenting on proposed ‘changes to Statute XI’, but in order to bring the University closer to ‘higher education sector norms already in place in other institutions’. It was suggested that the Proctors’ Office should be given ‘more authority to investigate complaints about sexual misconduct by students’ rather than leaving it to the police ‘to investigate such matters’.³⁴ An amended Resolution proposing to convene a new working group to consult further on the recommended changes to Statute XI was approved by Congregation on 15 October 2024. A consultation was scheduled to end on 31 January³⁵ with an amended legislative proposal to be submitted to the Education Committee in Week 8.³⁶

Cambridge has its Statute D, under which the University ‘shall from time to time prescribe such regulations as may be thought expedient in regard to the wearing of academical dress, the rendering of assistance and obedience to all persons in authority in the University and the definition and determination of charges, offences, and penalties’. Special Ordinance (ii) under this Statute provides for the appointment by Grace on the nomination of the General Board of Student Discipline Officers. They may commission an investigation into a potential breach of the Rules of Behaviour.³⁷ These Officers must include at least two who are members of the Regent House, and members of the Discipline Committee of three persons are required to undertake ‘training’. There is also a Student Disciplinary Procedure³⁸ and ‘student disciplinary panels’, with provision for appeal.

‘Academic’ misconduct includes cheating in examinations and other kinds of fraud, including misconduct in research or assessment. This seems increasingly likely to include AI, with Cambridge creating a separate category for it under its procedure from 2023-4.³⁹ If ‘academic misconduct’ is found the Vice-Chancellor may issue a notice amending a class-list found to contain unsubstantiated claims.

For breach of Cambridge’s Rules of Behaviour⁴⁰ a Student Discipline Officer may impose a minor sanction, refer the case to the Discipline Committee or ‘refer the matter for decision under another University procedure’. Its Appeal Committee of three persons must include someone legally qualified or with relevant experience; a member of the Regent House and a Proctor, Deputy Proctor, or Pro-Proctor. It must take into consideration any disciplinary action taken by a College to ensure that no student is punished twice for the same misconduct. The standard of proof is the balance of probabilities. The most

severe disciplinary penalty possible is an order that a student ‘not be admitted to the degree, or receive the diploma or certificate, until the disciplinary proceedings have been completed, notwithstanding that he or she may have done all that is required by Statute or Ordinance for the award of the degree, diploma, or certificate’.

1. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/protecting-students-as-consumers/#he>
2. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/phd-candidates-divided-wbether-theyre-students-or-employees>
3. <https://www.reporter.admin.cam.ac.uk/reporter/2023-24/weekly/6726/section1.shtml>
4. Hansard, HC 23 November 2002.
5. Higher Education Act of 2004, Part II and Schedule 3.
6. <https://www.oiahe.org.uk/>
7. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619cd8bc-8fa8f50382034d8c/211124_Higher_Education_Statement_on_Admissions.pdf and CMA, UK Higher education providers: Advice on consumer protection law (May, 2023).
8. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>
9. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/trading-standards-referrals-see-terms-in-student-contracts-changed-at-three-higher-education-providers/>
10. <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>
11. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/government-implementation-englands-campus-free-speech-act>
12. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ofs-wont-charge-free-speech-complaints-against-universities>
13. <https://hr.admin.ox.ac.uk/public-interest-disclosure-whistleblowing-code-of-practice>
14. <https://www.hr.admin.cam.ac.uk/policies-procedures/whistleblowing-policy-public-disclosure-university-employees>
15. https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6u23r60S6lvaaQ6
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17. <https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/programmes/admissions-appeals-complaints/>
18. <https://academic.web.ox.ac.uk/files/universitystudentcomplaintsprocedure2020pdf>, made under Regulation 6 of 2003 which is made under section 22 of Statute IX.
19. https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/student_complaint_procedure_october_2024.pdf
20. <https://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/documents/HT24-Complaints-Policy.pdf>

21. <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/complaints>
22. *Statutes and Ordinances*, p.209 and *Reporter*, 12 June 2024, p.669.
23. <https://www.oxfordstudent.com/2025/01/24/breaking-oxford-action-for-palestine-occupies-radcliffe-camera-establishing-the-khalida-jarrar-library/> and <https://cherwell.org/2025/01/24/oxford-oa4p-occupies-radcliffe-camera/>
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27. <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/global-crises/university-response-israel-gaza-middle-east>
28. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/notices/news/upholding-our-values-responding-to-calls-from-our-university-community>.
29. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/notices/news/statement-on-the-occupation-of-greenwich-house-and-encampment-on-senate-house-yard>
30. https://www.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/cambridge_v_pu_order_13.12.2024_sealed.pdf
31. Josh Freeman, ‘“There was nothing to do but take action”: The encampments protesting for Palestine and the response to them’, HEPI Report 185, January, 2025.
32. The Proctors originally had a role in support of the Universities’ Chancellors, who were judges in the Universities’ own courts and had jurisdiction over the city and its citizens as well as the scholars and students. Both universities continue to have their own ‘courts’ but since the *Administration of Justice Act* of 1977, they may consider only matters arising under their Statutes.
33. For academic University Officers in Cambridge these include detailed provisions deriving from *Education Reform Act* (1988) which make it very difficult to punish such an Officer by dismissal. <https://www.proctors.cam.ac.uk/what-do-we-do>
34. Supplement (1) to the *Gazette*, 21 March, 2024.
35. *Gazette*, 16 January
36. <https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/university-statutes>
37. <https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/student-complaints>
38. from October 2023, https://www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/files/2023-10-01_revised_sdf_and_sdp.pdf
39. <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/28936>
40. https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/field/field_document/Student%20Handbook%202024-25.pdf

The editors invite and welcome contributions from all our readers.
The content of Oxford Magazine relies largely on what arrives spontaneously on the editors’ desk and is usually published as received.

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Ben Bollig has stepped down as co-editor during his term as Assessor.

REVIEWS

Go Compare



Brian and Maggie, written by James Graham, directed by Stephen Frears (Channel 4).

'How are we to write history?' I asked, reviewing *Wolf Hall* in this magazine (No. 358 Hilary Term 2015). I am still asking the question, in the light of concoctions such as *The Crown* (2016-2023) and the various scandals treated in *A Very English Scandal* (2018, with Hugh Grant as Jeremy Thorpe), *A Very British Scandal* (2021, with Claire Foy as the Duchess of Argyll) and *A Very Royal Scandal* (2024, with Ruth Wilson as eye-brow-raising Emily Maitlis and Michael Sheen as Prince Andrew). The first of these is the best. There was also *The Trial of Christine Keeler* (2019-2020, with Sophie Cookson as Christine Keeler and James Norton as a creepy Stephen Ward), complete with the iconic chair. Another powerful recreation was of the David Frost interviews with former President Nixon (2008), with Michael Sheen as Frost and Frank Langella as Nixon – much more gripping than *Brian and Maggie*, but then, the material was better. All these things were superior to the superfluous pap on television.

And now *Brian and Maggie* based on Rob Burley's *Why Is This Lying Bastard Lying to Me?: Searching for the Truth on Political TV*. This docudrama builds up to Walden's last interview with Mrs. Thatcher on 29 October 1989. Steve Coogan ('Alan Partridge') plays Brian Walden and Harriet Walter Mrs. Thatcher (I refuse to call her Maggie, just as I refuse to call Mr. Johnson Boris). When it got to the final interview they stayed pretty close to the real event, trimming details here and there. The office chairs were accurate.

Was it satisfactory? Not entirely. For one thing the actors did not look or sound like the originals. Brian Walden sounded more like Chris Packham (the apologist for Just Stop Oil). He was 57 in 1989, and Coogan is now 58. Harriet Walter's Mrs. Thatcher's voice was more strident and less ingratiating than the real person's. Her face was more etched, especially in close-up. Harriet Walter is 74; Mrs Thatcher was a few days past her sixty-fourth birthday at the time of the interview. In this programme we were at some distance from the *Spitting Image* image of Mrs. Thatcher, and it caused a bit of alarm in the Guardianista conscience of Lucy Mangan who wrote – 'it's a real worry when Margaret Thatcher seems this admirable.' For my money Patricia Hodge was a much better Mrs. Thatcher in Ian Curteis's *The Falklands Play* (2002, but delayed

sixteen years), and she has even improved with age if one watches it now and sees her asking where we'd be now, *pace* the woke-rati, without the defeat of the Armada, the Napoleonic Wars and the two World Wars. The only problem is that Hodge looks and sounds more attractive than Mrs. Thatcher actually was. Bernard Ingham's voice (Paul Clayton) was just right. Geoffrey Howe (Paul Higgins) was too much of a wuss, but bewigged Nigel Lawson (Ivan Kaye) was a real big beast.

Maggie and Brian was ruined by the intrusive and irritating background music. Why do they have to have it? Why must art, and life itself, to rewrite Walter Pater, have to aspire to the condition of opera? One could call political dramas overlaid with music not soap-operas but soap-box-operas. I have had a long allergy to this, which began when I was twelve and watched the East Coast Floods (February 1953) on a neighbour's television, and dear God, it added the extra infliction of melodramatic background music, which I thought absurd at the time. One could have thought that the witty mockery of this convention in Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *High Anxiety* (1977) would have knocked it on the head for ever. No such luck! Why does every incident have to have incidental music?

Of course an extra pain watching *Brian and Maggie* was the adverts. They have the effect of reminding how far we have come since 1989, with islanded (or should that be isolated?) kitchens, cars dwarfing Behemoths, designer cremations, Hollywood-like holidays and sofas measured in furlongs. Betrayal! was a prominent highlighted word in *Maggie and Brian*. Turning to the adverts there was that dire duo Ant and Dec (Rod Liddle is quite right to ask what is the point of them?) advertising Santander Edge with 'Treachery!' as the emphatic word. The moustachioed £200,000 a year (isn't that obscene?) opera-singer Wynne Evans appeared. I was under the impression he had been thrust into outer darkness.

Immediately after the broadcast one could see on More 4 (as if we hadn't already had enough) the actual interview, and, watching it and comparing it, one was asking what on earth is the point of a dramatization of it when the authentic reality is so readily available? In addition to the final interview there were scenes in *Brian and Maggie* where Brian Walden was talking in private to Mrs. Thatcher. I have suggested it before, and I shall suggest it again: with historical dramas there ought to be a red dot at the bottom of the screen for scenes for which there is absolutely no evidence and the data is even likely to be false, blue

dots for plausible scenes and green dots for scenes backed up by actual records. Big red dot for Hotspur being the same age as Prince Harry. When one watches private interviews in docudramas one's immediate reaction is that they *must* be invented, so are no help in writing reliable history.

The script for *Brian and Maggie* was not bad, but that line 'You're not a good interviewer Brian; you're an exceptional interviewer' is straight Stephen Cowell. I don't think Mrs Thatcher would ever have used the word 'blag' but I might stand corrected. In one conversation Brian Walden and Mrs Thatcher refer to their time at Oxford (he to Queen's College, she to Somerville College) from relatively under-privileged backgrounds, which has given them the perspective of 'the outsider'. The word 'entitlement' was not bandied around then, but that is what they were objecting to. 'Individualism' then was on the whole a less problematical term than it has since become. But that's the subject for another essay.

And what about the interview itself? It still surprises when Brian Walden asks the P.M if is she is 'off her trolley'. Paxo *avant la lettre*. He persists with the main question of why Nigel Lawson resigned, like a terrier with a bone, and Mrs. Thatcher, like politicians through the ages, deploys all possible resources to avoid answering it fully. I imagine that Pericles went in for diversionary tactics when the question of Aspasia came up. Mrs. Thatcher keeps her cool very well, and gives the impression of being on top of a good deal of information. At the back of one's mind watching it was the thought of how Trump would handle such an interview – spinning off into blags and impenetrable clouds of irrelevancies at every turn. Robert Burley says that Trump 'answers the question'. Nonsense. Since Walden was never going to get a satisfactory answer to the question of why Mrs. Thatcher did not show a more human side I don't think he should he have bothered asking it. It did lead, however, to one of the highlight exchanges:

Walden: 'You come over as being someone who one of your backbenchers said is slightly off her trolley, authoritarian, domineering, refusing to listen to anybody else – why? Why cannot you publicly project what you have just told me is your private character?'

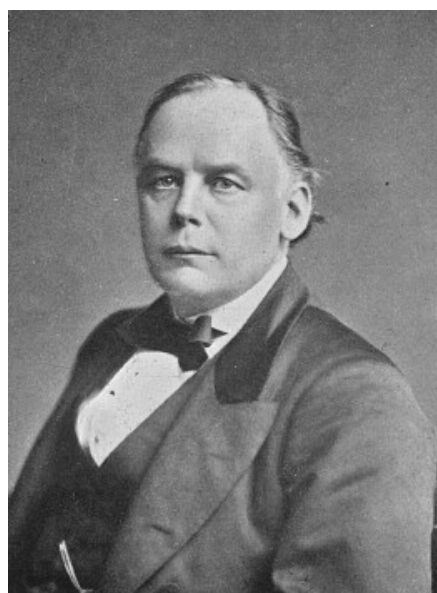
Thatcher: 'Brian, if anyone's coming over as domineering in this interview, it's you.'

That's him told.

There was one big question he did not ask, and if I had been doing the interview I would have asked it:

'Could you explain in detail what the differences are between your political and economic theories and those of Nigel Lawson and Alan Walters?'

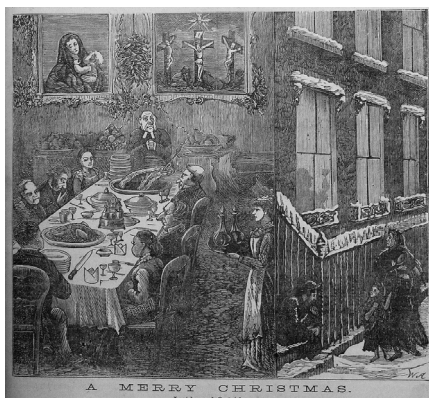
If it turned out that they were not significant one could conclude that there were inscrutable and arcane personality differences which could not be articulated or perhaps not even explained or admitted to. And it's at that point that it starts to get difficult to write analytical history, even for Shakespeare. In an earlier interview Walden coined the famous phrase 'Victorian values' which Mrs. Thatcher latched onto. It would have been nice if both of them had gone into the complex ins and outs of those values. But which Victorians was one to consider? Thomas Carlyle? John Stuart Mill? John Ruskin? Dante Gabriel Rossetti? Robert Browning? Matthew Arnold? George Eliot? Benjamin Disraeli? William Gladstone? William Booth? Charles Bradlaugh (who looks, curiously, like Brian Walden—could they be related?)? George William Foote? Edward Aveling (Eleanor Marx's partner)?, William Stead (who bought the child Eliza Armstrong)? Cecil Rhodes? Oscar Wilde?



Charles Bradlaugh. 'He was always in favour of self-help and individual responsibility, and he was naturally hostile to everything that might weaken those precious elements of English life.' (G. W. Foote, *Reminiscences of Charles Bradlaugh* (1891)).



Brian Walden



*'A Merry Christmas Inside and Outside'. Victorian values in operation. Cartoon from G. W. Foote's *The Freethinker* (1882).*

There might be the equivalents of Brian Walden around now, but the politicians *de nos jours* are increasingly reluctant to expose themselves to a long exploratory interview where cracks, not to say chasms, might appear. They are probably mightily relieved that Stephen Sackur's *Hard Talk* has been axed (October 2024).

BERNARD RICHARDS

CODA

Since sending in the above review I have learnt that to mark the centenary of Margaret Thatcher, the historian, columnist, and podcaster Dominic Sandbrook and composer Joseph Phibbs are collaborating to compose an opera about her, titled Mrs. T. It makes the phrase I coined 'soap-box opera' doubly appropriate. Excerpts from Mrs T. will be showcased this autumn in London, directed by Lucy Bradley, with mezzo-soprano Lucy Schauer in the title role. Additional roles, including Geoffrey Howe and Ronald Reagan, are to be announced. The author, journalist and broadcaster Libby Purves will feature as the Newsreader.

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